DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 506 SO 030 393

AUTHOR Ring, Diane M.
TITLE Hindu Mythology: Gods, Goddesses and Values.
SPONS AGENCY Center for International Education (ED), Washington, DC.; United States Educational Foundation in India.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 24p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Area Studies; Class Activities; Ethnocentrism; Foreign Countries; *Foreign Culture; Global Approach; High Schools; Instructional Materials; Multicultural Education; *Mythology; Religion; *Religion Studies; Religious Cultural Groups; Social Studies; Student Educational Objectives; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Hinduism; *India

ABSTRACT

This unit on Hindu mythology is designed to help secondary students see beyond the exotic elements of another culture to the things its people have in common with people in the West: a continuous effort to find a purpose in existence, to explain the unknown, and to define good and bad, right and wrong. Students are asked to analyze Hindu religious stories in order to understand the Hindu worldview and moral ideals, and then to compare them with their own and those of the West. Five lessons are presented: (1) The Hindu Triad; (2) The Ramayana; (3) The Image of Women; (4) Hindu Worship; and (5) Religion: A Comparative Essay. For each lesson a number of objectives are identified, several activities are suggested, and the materials needed to complete the lesson are listed. A 15-item bibliography also is included in the document. (DB)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED329506

# Hindu Mythology

## Gods, Goddesses, and Values

Diane M. Ring
St. Charles High School
1020 Dunham Road
St. Charles, Illinois 60174

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

DIANE M. RING.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SO 030 393

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

This project was completed under a U.S. Department of Education Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad Grant, 1989, Ms. Lunching Chiao, Project Director.

Introduction

Breaking through the barrier of American teen-age ethnocentrism is especially difficult when teaching a unit on India. My students find India an exotic culture, difficult to understand and easy to dismiss as "weird", "dumb", or, to those a little more sophisticated, primitive. Contributing to this perception may be Hindu mythology with its demons, multi-armed and multi-colored gods and goddesses, and fairy-tale-like stories and fables. Frequent questions include: "Do they really believe in all those gods? Do they really think they look like that and why do they look like that? How can anyone believe in monkey gods and elephant gods? Do they believe all those battles between demons and gods really happened?" The inevitable conclusion drawn is that Indian society, with its caste system, "weird" religion, and poverty, is "dumb" (I quote my students) or, at best, just not quite on the same level as ours.

The temptation for the teacher may be to avoid discussing Hindu mythology altogether. India units may concentrate more on developmental and economic issues, Indian democracy, Gandhi and civil disobedience, the Indian family, or even the caste system in decline. In attempting to prevent our students from making ethnocentric judgments, we may eliminate topics like mythology that seem to highlight the alienness of Indian culture. To teach Hindu religious stories may even seem to trivialize Hinduism, especially if our students view them in a patronizing manner--seeing them as bizarre but cute. But a study of Hindu mythology can serve to highlight moral and personal ideals our cultures hold in common. Since religious stories are such an important way of teaching people what is considered ethical behavior and how to

grapple with moral dilemmas, to neglect Hindu mythology is to neglect an important aspect of Indian culture (of any culture, for that matter).

The main goal of this unit on Hindu mythology is to help students see beyond the "exotic" elements of another culture to what its people have in common with us: a continuous effort to find a purpose in human existence, to explain the unknown (especially "God"), and to define good and bad, right and wrong. Students will analyze Hindu religious stories in order to understand a Hindu worldview and Hindu moral ideals, and then compare them to their own and those of the West. The level of discussion (from concrete to abstract) will depend on the level of the class, so teachers may need to vary lesson plans accordingly. In writing this I had in mind my own sophomore students.

Unit Goals

To develop in students an appreciation of an alien way of viewing the world, the universe, and the realm of the spirit.
To develop and reinforce in students a recognition of intellectual and spiritual ideas and goals humans have in common.
To alert students to their own ethnocentrism and to do away with a we/they mentality.
To help students recognize elements common to all religions (values, practices, images of the divine).
To familiarize students with:
-the Hindu concept of God
-Hindu ideas on morality
-Hindu mythology, one means by which these ideas are taught.
To reinforce analytical skills through the use of comparison and class discussions, as well as written exercises.

Lesson 1: The Hindu Triad

Objectives: Students will:

1) identify and describe Brahman and the Hindu triad of Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu.
2) analyze the qualities of the gods of the triad from descriptions of and stories about the gods.
3) compare the characteristics of the main Hindu gods to those of other religions (especially Western religions).
4) examine how the Hindu gods are depicted and explain the symbolism of these depictions.
5) compare the depictions of Hindu gods to those of other religions (Christianity or Greek mythology, for example).
6) identify characteristics/symbols common to Hinduism and other religions.

Activities:

1. Ask students to describe how God has been explained or depicted to them. Ask them to list characteristics of God, and write them on the blackboard. At some point, the Trinity will probably be suggested by some students, the concept of Yahweh by others, etc. Ideas might include:

omnipotent
omniscient
loving
compassionate
God as judge
merciful
mysterious
Trinity (3 gods in one)
creator
savior.

Sources students may use for this activity could be as informal as their own ideas (based on whatever religious upbringing they have had), or a more formal exercise in interviews with families, friends, priests, ministers, and rabbis. It could also include what they have learned

about other religions already studied in this particular class. Have students copy the list down and tell them they will use it later to compare with what they discover about Hindu concepts of God.

2. Give a short lecture describing the concept of Brahman, the Universal Spirit, the single source of energy, and the gods of the Triad: Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Preserver), and Shiva (Destroyer). This is a good time to use the Triad to introduce the Hindu concepts of time and creation--in cycles, as opposed to the linear Western concept. The three gods represent the cycle of creation.

3. After this introductory discussion and lecture, assign students to find stories about the three Hindu gods to share with the class. This could be done by the whole class (divided into three groups) or by several individuals assigned this part of the unit's activities (later, other students may research female heroes, worship, and festivals). Another way to divide work would be to assign some students to find stories while others find pictures of images of the Hindu gods, and yet a third group finds descriptions of major Greek gods and Christian depictions of the Trinity. How the work is organized will depend on the maturity level of the students, as well as their research abilities. The obvious alternative to student research (if the teacher feels research is not practical) is for the teacher to introduce short readings selected by him/her on each god. An excellent source for both stories and pictures (images) is Victoria Ions' Indian Mythology.

4. Have students report on what they have found. As stories are told, have students begin to list the qualities they find among the Hindu gods. As a class, compare these qualities to those the students have

identified from their own concepts of God, etc. There will be a great deal of overlap. Some Christian students will note, for example, the parallels between the story of Jesus Christ and Vishnu's incarnations, or between God the Father (frequently associated with creation) and Brahma. The qualities of judgment, mercy, compassion, etc., will all be found among Hindu gods as well as in the Western concept of God. Further discussion can revolve around how these common qualities may represent what man looks for most in God.

5. Have students who have found pictures and images of the gods present their findings. Pictures should be reproduced and distributed (if not by the students after research then by the teacher as part of the lesson). The symbolism present in each picture should be explained. For example, the depiction of Shiva as Lord Nataraj would require explanation of the circle of flame in which he dances, the drum he holds, the position of his two hands, and the dwarf upon which he dances. Compare these Hindu images to those from other religions.

6. Have students compare the symbolism in all the images and discuss common elements as well as differences. If the symbols are different, are the ideas they represent the same? For example, Athena, the Greek goddess, is armed with weapons as are the Hindu gods. Christian pictures and statues frequently show the hands in a gesture of blessing and protection (as with Shiva as Lord Nataraj). How do these images reinforce the concept of the god? How do they depict his qualities? There are many directions the discussion may take and many variations, depending on the time allotted and the research done.

At this point, the students, it is hoped, will be sensitized to the symbolism and concepts of God inherent not only in Hinduism, but in their own culture as well.

Materials Needed: Books on and pictures of gods and goddesses of Hinduism and other religions. Possible sources include:

Indian Mythology by Veronica Ions
Looking at Hindu Mythology by H. Daniel Smith
Hinduism: An Introduction by S. Jagannathan
Seasons of Splendour by Madhur Jaffrey
Gods, Demons and Others by R.K. Narayan

See bibliography for complete information.

Evaluation: This can be based on a number of things: results of class discussions, student-located and reproduced materials, or a quiz on the Hindu gods.

Lesson 2: The Ramayana

Objectives: Students will:

1. identify the main characters of the Ramayana and describe their roles in the story.
2. relate the basic story of the Ramayana.
3. recognize Rama and Sita as incarnations of Vishnu and Lakshmi.
4. analyze the story to determine the characteristics of the ideal Hindu man and the ideal Hindu woman.
5. compare the ideal Hindu man and woman to American ideas of the ideal man and woman.
6. state conclusions about similarities and differences between the Hindu and American ideals.

Activities:

1. The teacher should introduce this lesson with a class discussion of the characteristics of the ideal American man and the ideal American woman. I found it works well to simply have a class brainstorming session. Where students disagree the quality can be put to a vote. (This can produce some interesting side discussions on sex roles.) Again list the characteristics on the blackboard and ask students to record them in their notebooks.

2. Students should read some version of the Ramayana. Whether this will be an abbreviated version or a complete one such as Narayan's prose version will depend upon the time the teacher has and the maturity and skill level of the students. If time is really short, the teacher will find the story described in Ions' Indian Mythology and could tell the class the story. The teacher may want to use worksheets or identification lists to ensure reading by the students and to help them keep track of characters and events.

3. After reading is completed, divide the class into small groups. Ask each group to list characteristics of the ideal man and woman BASED

ON THE READING. For each quality assigned to a man or woman, students should point to an event or a decision made by a character in the story that illustrates that quality. There is no need to limit this to the actions of Rama and Sita only. Examples of characteristics may include: loyalty (both Sita and Lakshman insist on accompanying Rama into exile); courage (Hanuman's visit to Lanka to find Sita); honor (Rama's abiding by his father's promise to give the kingdom to his brother), etc. Some characteristics may seem to apply to both sexes, others to only one. The image of the ideal woman will tend to emphasize a more traditional and passive role since Sita is the only "good" woman in the story.

4. Bring the class back together into a large group. Each group should report on its list and defend its decisions with specific examples from the story. The teacher should list the qualities on the blackboard or have a student do this. Once the lists are agreed upon, class discussion should center around a comparison of the lists on the ideal American man and woman and those determined based on the Ramayana. There should be considerable overlap. There is more likely to be disagreement on the ideal woman. In my classes, the students determined that the ideal American woman has a more active and varied role than that suggested by Sita. (This can be addressed in the next lesson on the female role suggested by the story of the goddess Devi.)
On the whole, students will find that the qualities presented as ideal are very similar. This exercise can reinforce not only our common beliefs over space but over time as well. The lesson might close with a discussion of why these common characteristics are found so valuable by different cultures and different ages.

Materials Needed: Readings and handouts (to check reading comprehension) based on the source selected.
Sources available include:
The Ramayana by R. K. Narayan
Gods, Demons and Others by Narayan
Indian Mythology by Veronica Ions
Seasons of Splendour by Madhur Jaffrey
("How Ram defeated the Demon King Ravan")

Evaluation: The success of the exercise will be determined again by how the discussion goes. A quiz could also be used to check familiarity with the story and the characters.

Lesson 3: The Image of Women

I have placed this lesson after that on the Ramayana so that students can compare the ideal woman as represented by Sita with the characteristics of the Devi (Great Goddess). I believe that, as with other cultures, Hindu mythology encourages a more complex idea of the characteristics of women than popular images (those emphasized) may always convey. One can find quite a few examples of woman as a savior of her people in a non-traditional role.

Objectives: Students will:

1) define and explain the concept of the Devi.
2) compare her qualities and actions to those of Sita as depicted in the Ramayana.
3) compare the qualities of the Devi to those of female heroes of other religions.
4) analyze how these images might influence the roles women learn in their societies.
5) state conclusions regarding what image of the female receives more emphasis in our and Indian society.

Activities:

1. Students should read or the teacher should tell the story of the Devi's destruction of the demon Mahisha. This story can be found in Ions' Indian Mythology or Narayan's Gods, Demons and Others. Depending upon the comprehension level of the students, study guides or worksheets may be required to be sure that students identify the main characters and plot elements of the story. This might be accomplished with a short quiz, too. Students should be able to explain why the gods could not destroy Mahisha, why his destruction was necessary, how the Devi came into existence, and how she was able to destroy him.

2. In small groups or in general class discussion, instruct the students to describe the qualities or characteristics of the Devi. Conclusions should include not only great beauty but courage, confidence in her power, violent when necessary, skilled with weapons--in fact, a great warrior. Some of these are attributes traditionally associated with men. The teacher should also focus discussion on the issue that ONLY a female could destroy Mahisha and (as depicted in Narayan's story) the folly of Mahisha's assumption that a woman could not destroy him in battle. The teacher might at this point also briefly discuss the goddess as Kali (see Ions).

3. Ask students to suggest comparable figures from other religions. This may require prompting by the teacher, but some will undoubtedly be familiar with Greek myths or the Christian Gospels, for example. Have students research different female figures in other religions (This could be done by those students who did not do research for Lesson 1). If time permits, one or more students might read and share with the class the Book of Judith in the Old Testament (Judith, to save her people, murders an enemy general); others include the image of the Greek goddess Athena (as protector of Athens and a warrior goddess), the Virgin Mary in the Christian Gospels (note the image of Mary standing on the globe, crushing the serpent Satan underfoot) or even medieval saints such as Joan of Arc. Images and events should be discussed. If time does not allow several stories to be shared, one might be selected based on previous units or the background of the students.

4. The class should now discuss how and whether contrasting images of women in religious stories contribute to the assigned role of women

in society. If the students have already studied the Indian family, one might ask which image--Sita or Devi--is more reflected in the Indian woman's role. Have them speculate on how influential religious images are in determining a woman's role. In the U.S., does religion play a part or are religious images unimportant? How do girls in the U.S. learn what is expected of them? There is potential here for a rather wide-ranging discussion of what women's roles should be also. For example, should women in the armed forces be allowed in combat? Are powerful women who can vanquish males in battle only a myth? Depending on time and the class, further discussion could be encouraged. Students might consult their parents and religious leaders on the woman's role to compare what people believe to the images they have seen presented in the story of Devi and in the Ramayana.

Materials needed: readings on the Devi. Possible sources include:

Indian Mythology by Veronica Ions
Gods, Demons and Others by R.K. Narayan

Evaluation: Success here, as in other lessons, depends primarily on the discussion generated. The teacher can evaluate based on participation in discussion, success of research for comparison, and any worksheets on comprehension. Short writing assignments might also require students to compare Sita and the Devi or Devi and Athena, etc.

Lesson 4: Hindu Worship

This lesson has been written as a comparison of Christian worship with Hindu worship, since Christianity is the religion of the vast majority of my students and part of my background as well. It could be adapted if students are not Christian in background or are more mixed or more time is allotted. For example, a comparison to Judaism might focus on home worship, holidays and Jewish law (as compared to dharma). The key, as with previous lessons, is to find the common elements.

Objectives: Students will:

1) describe daily worship in the Hindu home, icluding use of images (icons), and steps in worship.
2) describe the interior arrangement of a Hindu temple, including display of images, and the steps of worship there.
3) explain what each step in worship symbolizes.
4) compare Hindu worship to worship in American homes and churches.
5) compare the symbolism involved in Hindu worship to that in the worship the students engage in.
6) state similarities in the ways Indians worship and Americans worship.

Activities:

1. Ask students to research methods of worship in Christian churches. This might be done in two ways. First, students who attend church could take notes (if necessary) on the step by step worship in their churches on Sunday, including images in the church, and objects and substances used in worship. They should also describe the arrangement of the interior of the church. Second, those students who are not church-goers could research or be given a reading on worship. This is described in a number of books available on world religions or may also be found in geography or global studies textbooks. Students

might be referred to Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions or Hinnells' A Handbook of Living Religions. Students should discover the use of images to represent God and the saints in church as well as in some homes; the use of food during Christian services; the use of bells, flames, and water; the use of song; and the reading of Scriptures, including sermons delivered by priests/ministers on the meaning of these readings. They may also describe the use of images in homes and daily private prayer. Students should report to the class their findings. The teacher should help students to organize and list the general steps in worship. For example, a description of a Catholic mass might include:

-bells to announce the start of worship
-opening prayers and use of song
-readings from Scriptures and sermon
-offering of bread and wine (food) to God
-priest's blessing of and receiving of food by worshippers
-closing prayers.

A description of the church would include the altar at the front with an image of Jesus on the cross and candles lit near the altar, a sanctuary lamp to indicate the presence of God, images of the saints in the church, and the area where the congregation gathers.

2. Students may either read themselves or the teacher may describe the steps in Hindu worship at home and in the temple. This may be found in filmstrips available, although I find most filmstrips too brief. They can be useful if they include pictures of the interior of temples. Descriptions can be found in Jagannathan's Hinduism: An Introduction, in Hinnells, and in Eerdman.

3. Ask students to list the steps in Hindu worship. This might be done as a group in class, in small groups or individually. The teacher might also decide to divide research responsibility between those researching and describing Christian worship and those researching Hindu worship. Steps in worship would include:

-the ringing of bells by individuals to begin worship
-the use of flame (lamps)
-the offering of gifts, including food, to the gods
-the distribution of food to worshippers
-congregational singing (sometimes)
-the presence of priests to share readings and commentaries with individual worshippers.

Descriptions of the temple would include the presence of images, lamps, etc.

4. Ask students to compare their lists and to identify common elements and symbols. These might include, for example, food as both offering and gift from God, light as dispelling ignorance and sin (and associated with God), bells at the beginning of worship, prayer, hymns, etc. While differences should be recognized as well (congregational worship is the major use of Christian churches while individual worship is more common in Hindu temples, for example), emphasis should be placed on the common elements which lead us back to the similarities in the way God is perceived.

5. Additional activities (depending on time) could include research into and comparison of festivals and holidays. For example, Divali could be compared to Chanuka or Christmas.

Materials needed: Books on worship in various religions are needed. Some sources are:

Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions
A Handbook of Living Religions by John R. Hinnells, ed.
Hinduism: An Introduction by S. Jagganathan

Evaluation: This can be based on the success of discussions, the evaluation of research notes and presentations by students, a final test on the unit, or with the product of the final lesson--an essay.

Lesson 5: Religion: A Comparative Essay

The emphasis in this series of lesson plans was on finding common elements in the ways in which Americans and Indians perceive God, worship him, and interpret how he wants men and women to behave. Students will have little trouble finding differences. The (to us) exotic appearances of Hindu gods and goddesses, the (to us) fairy-tale-like stories, and the persistence of the caste system ensure that American students will view India and Indian religion as "different". I do not seriously think that at the high school level we run the risk of overemphasizing similarities, thus diluting the unique qualities of Hinduism, as long as we allow students to discover Hinduism at least in part on their own. So, to close the unit, I suggest a comparative essay.

Objectives: Students will:

1) compare Hinduism to another religion in concept of God, methods of worship, and ideas of the ideal man and woman.
2) state in writing conclusions on areas in which these two religions are similar.
3) state in writing conclusions on where two religions are dissimilar.

Activities:

1. Students will use class notes and readings to prepare a chart to help in writing a comparison essay. The teacher must decide whether the students may select a religion with which to compare Hinduism or whether the teacher should assign one. Chart categories should include:

-description of God: characteristics
-images of God: description and meaning of symbols associated with God
-how God is worshipped (can divide into household, temple/church, festivals)
-how religious stories/images communicate God's expectations of men and women.

Students may benefit from working together on the chart.

2) Students will use the chart to compose an essay comparing religions. Both differences and similarities should be discussed. Students might be instructed to draw a conclusion as to which are more significant--differences or similarities. This, too, can give the teacher what is perhaps the best opportunity to evaluate the success of the lessons in drawing parallels. I do not mean to suggest that students should be graded based on which they see as more significant--similarities or differences. But their reactions to Hinduism may be found in their answers to such a question; noting if a change has occurred from the beginning of the unit will help the teacher to evaluate the success of the unit in reducing ethnocentrism.

Materials needed: previous readings and notes from class
a chart form for students to fill in
written instructions on the essay assignment

Evaluation: the essays, themselves, of course.

Closing Notes

Of the lessons described, I have had the opportunity so far to use only one--lesson 2 on the Ramayana. The response of the students was enthusiastic. Any time students have the chance to use stories to learn and the opportunity to relate "exotic" practices to their everyday lives, interest in the lesson improves. American students, in particular, need to begin to "relate" to foreign cultures. A series of lessons on Hinduism is a great opportunity. Unfortunately, for most high school teachers, time is short. I estimate that this unit could take easily two or more weeks if done with maximum student research and participation. The lessons involved all require more than one day of research and discussion. Most of us, I believe, would find it very difficult to give that much time to one aspect of Indian culture. However, lessons 1, 2, and 4 can easily stand alone and at least begin to fulfill the overall objectives of the unit. Lessons 2 and 3 can fit together nicely. The unit can be adapted to fit the needs and circumstances of short or long studies of India. And high school teachers are great at adaptation!

Bibliography

Cavendish, Richard, ed. Mythology: An Illustrated Encyclopedia. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1980. This covers the Mythology of Hinduism as well as that of other religions of the ancient world.

Eck, Diana L. Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India. Chambersburg, Pa.: Anima Publications, 1985.

Ellwood, Robert S., Jr. Many People, Many Faiths: An Introduction to the Religious Life of Humankind. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982

Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions. Grand Rapids, Mi.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982.

Hinnells, John R., ed. A Handbook of Living Religions. New York: Viking Penquin, Inc., 1984.

Ions, Veronica. Indian Mythology. New York: Paul Hamlyn, 1975. This book is a good reference for teachers for use in preparing for discussions of gods and goddesses. It also contains summaries of the most popular stories about gods and goddesses.

Jaffrey, Madhur. Seasons of Splendour. London: Pavilion Books Limited, 1984. This is a book of children's stories, excellent for use with lower level classes.

Jagannathan, Shakunthala. Hinduism: An Introduction. Bombay: Vakils, Feffer, and Simons, Ltd., 1989. This is an excellent introduction to the beliefs of Hinduism and to Hindu worship that I picked up in India. It's a valuable source for the teacher who lacks time for basic research.

Kinsley, David. Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. This source is especially useful for its chapters on Durga and Kali (the Devi).

Narayan, R.K. Gods, Demons, and Others. New York: the Viking Press, 1966. The stories of "Devi" and "Ravana" are excellent for use in lessons 2 and 3.

----------. The Ramayana. New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1972. This Penguin paperback is a good prose version of the epic for those who have time to extend the lesson on the Ramayana.

Smith, H. Daniel. Looking at Hindu Mythology. New Delhi: Educational Resources Center, 1976.

Some sources for information on Greek mythology ( if the comparison is to be made with other ancient cultures) are:

Field, D.M. Greek and Roman Mythology. New York: Chartwell Books, Inc., 1977.

Hamilton, Edith. Mythology: Timeless Tales oq Gods and Heroes. New York: New American Library, 1969.

Richardson, Donald. Great Zeus and All His Children. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984.